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INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND
BUSINESSES: WHOSE BUSINESS IS IT TO
EMPLOY INDIGENOUS WORKERS?

B. HUNTER

Centre for
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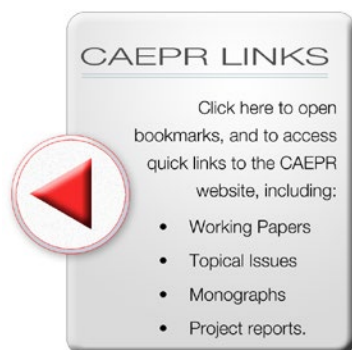
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Abstract

The number of Indigenous entrepreneurs (self-employed people) has increased by a factor of around three over the past two decades. However, little is known about demand for Indigenous labour and the relationship of Indigenous workers to their employers. Even less is known about Indigenous businesses. Supply Nation has adopted a definition of such businesses that requires that Indigenous stakeholders hold majority equity, but some researchers have argued that this definition should be relaxed to include businesses in which Indigenous people hold only half the equity in the enterprise. This paper uses data from Industry Capability Network (ICN) Queensland, which has collected basic business information on a large number of businesses operating in Queensland. The findings reveal that Indigenous businesses have substantially better outcomes for Indigenous employment than non-Indigenous businesses—a result that holds even when the definition of Indigenous business is relaxed. The paper also documents how Indigenous employment is concentrated in larger businesses in particular industry sectors. Non-Indigenous micro-businesses employ relatively few Indigenous workers, and future research should explore why this is the case. To understand the issues involved, it will be necessary to collect multi-level data that link detailed information on employers and employees (including a substantial sample of Indigenous workers).

Keywords: Business and Indigenous employment, entrepreneurs, Indigenous-friendly workplaces

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
ICN	Industry Capability Network
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan

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Introduction

Considerable economic research has been conducted into the determinants of Indigenous labour force status, but little is known about demand for Indigenous labour arising from the business sector, or the relationship of Indigenous workers to their employers. Understanding the demand side of the labour market is crucial because economic disadvantage partly reflects the interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agents in the labour market and other markets—it is not solely a characteristic of Indigenous people. Research should analyse the role of Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs in driving Indigenous employment; however, it is also important to understand the relationship of all employers with their Indigenous workforce (and potential Indigenous workers).

The majority of economic research on Indigenous Australians focuses on workers and jobseekers (e.g. Hunter 2004; Stephens 2010). This focus is driven by data availability, since most surveys include Indigenous Australian workers. There is no large-scale dataset that collects substantial information on Indigenous businesses. As well, limited information has been collected on general Australian businesses and workplace practices with respect to Indigenous and other workers since the last Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey in 1995 (Hunter & Hawke 2001, 2002). In particular, virtually no systematic large-scale information has been collected from, or by, Australian businesses about their Indigenous workforces. This paper presents new data on businesses to provide greater insight into firm-level factors associated with Indigenous employment. The role of Indigenous businesses in driving Indigenous employment outcomes is particularly important because, if nothing else, the owners and managers of such businesses would be expected to have an appreciation of Indigenous culture and history. The Indigenous owners have a direct appreciation of their culture and history, while managers and non-Indigenous equity holders of Indigenous businesses are more likely to understand the motivations, values and behaviours associated with being Indigenous because they should be working towards the interests of the Indigenous owners of the business. Of course, there can always be disputes between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous equity holders, but the focus on businesses with at least half the equity being held by Indigenous parties will minimise the potential for conflict.

Existing studies have tended to focus on self-employment to make inferences about Indigenous business because of the relatively small number of Indigenous businesses.

This approach is not ideal because self-employment is conceptually different from participation in a business: self-employment refers to an individual rather than a social organisation. The self-employed have to bear the risk of their own economic activities and hence are, by definition, entrepreneurial (see Cantillon 1730). The number of Indigenous self-employed, and presumably the businesses they run, has increased dramatically in the past two decades.¹ Hunter (2013) provides evidence that the number of Indigenous self-employed almost tripled between 1991 and 2011, increasing from 4,600 to 12,500. There are now substantial numbers of Indigenous self-employed, but they are still a relatively small component of overall Indigenous employment—only 3 per cent of the working-age Indigenous population is self-employed (compared with >10% of the non-Indigenous population).

Even less is known about Indigenous businesses than about the Indigenous self-employed, partly because of an ongoing debate about what constitutes an Indigenous business. Following recommendations from research by Willmetts (2009), Supply Nation adopted a definition based on whether Indigenous stakeholders have majority equity in the business.² However, Foley (2005) has convincingly argued that business partnerships with non-Indigenous entrepreneurs are particularly important avenues for Indigenous businesses. Recently, Foley and Hunter (2013) have argued that the majority-equity definition should be relaxed to include businesses in which Indigenous people hold only half the equity in the enterprise, because they will retain considerable control over the business operations. This debate matters because broader definitions of Indigenous business, based on self-employment data from the Australian census, are associated with significantly higher rates of Indigenous employment than other businesses (Hunter 2013). This paper revisits this finding based on information provided directly by businesses on the nature of their business and the Indigenous status of their workforce.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature using data provided by Industry Capability Network (ICN) Queensland, which collected basic business information on a large number of businesses operating in Queensland. The database provides information on whether Indigenous people hold majority equity, whether a business has joint ownership by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (i.e. with 50% equity held by Indigenous parties), the number of Indigenous and other workers, turnover by the business, and a rudimentary indicator of the industrial activity undertaken in the enterprise (in an ICN service called the Black Business Finder). By late 2013, ICN Queensland had collected up-to-date information on more than 17,710 businesses

in Queensland, with the majority of these providing valid information on the main variables used in the analysis. Most importantly, 183 Indigenous businesses are included, with around one-third of these being partnerships in which Indigenous people hold half the equity in the company.³ The ICN Queensland data provide a unique opportunity to analyse how Indigenous businesses differ from non-Indigenous businesses, and explore potential heterogeneity in two main categories of Indigenous businesses.

This research addresses three broad research issues:

- It provides some basic characteristics of Indigenous and other Australian businesses.
- It identifies what sorts of businesses employ Indigenous workers using firm-level data. For example, are Indigenous people employed in larger or smaller businesses (measured in terms of workforce size or turnover of revenue)?
- It explores whether the extent of Indigenous equity in a business matters for Indigenous employment outcomes, to inform the debate about the most appropriate definition of an Indigenous business.

The next section provides some further background on Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs. This is followed by sections that introduce the ICN Queensland data, and analyse the data using descriptive statistical techniques and some regression analysis. The final section provides some concluding remarks that attempt to draw out the implications of the findings for policy-makers and future research.

Background

There is a growing literature on the economics of self-employment and entrepreneurship (Parker 2004). These studies identify two main motivations for Indigenous people to start a business. One important motivation is to avoid discriminatory treatment by employers in the labour market, banks in the capital market or consumers in the product market. However, positive factors also attract Indigenous people to business. Working with people who share a similar ethnicity and culture can be a major motivation for starting a business. Indigenous business can reinforce Indigenous identity, and lead to a focus on specific goods and services that often involve Indigenous cultural activities.

As noted above, Supply Nation uses a majority-equity definition of an Indigenous business in which the business is 'at least 51 per cent owned by Indigenous

Australians and the principal executive officer is an Indigenous Australian and the key decisions in the business are made by Indigenous Australians'.⁴ This definition excludes business partnerships between an Indigenous person and a non-Indigenous person, in which the Indigenous equity is only 50 per cent; these partnerships could appear in census statistics as Indigenous self-employed.

Both the majority-owned and partnership definitions rely on the ability to identify whether the parties who own the equity are Indigenous. Many researchers have noted that there is a nonbiological component to Indigenous population growth in the census (e.g. Biddle 2012); the main implication is that a person may choose to identify as Indigenous at a particular time or in particular circumstances, but not in other contexts. Of course, if the people collecting the data can validate the acceptance of equity holders within Indigenous communities, this issue might not be important in practice.

Willmet (2009: 41) argues that some Australian contractors could identify as Indigenous businesses on the basis of participation of Indigenous people in providing services, even when no Indigenous people hold equity in the business. As Willmet notes, there is no statutory protection of the status of minority businesses in Australia, and hence anyone can claim to be an Indigenous business, even if actual Indigenous involvement is minimal or even non-existent.⁵ Regardless of whether these misrepresentations are deliberate or a failure to realise an aspiration to involve Indigenous business, they mislead public debate. Clearly, in defining which businesses are Indigenous, researchers and data collectors need to exercise care in ensuring that the business can legitimately be called Indigenous.

Although a body of work attempts to analyse Indigenous self-employment, one study (Hunter 2013) has implications for the research questions being studied in this paper. Hunter (2013) conducted a regression analysis of census data on self-employment aggregated to Indigenous Area level (one of the standard units used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] for Indigenous geography; ABS 2011). The analysis was consistent with Indigenous businesses generating many more private sector jobs for Indigenous workers than other Australian businesses. One possibility is that Indigenous employers provide a more conducive working environment for Indigenous workers. Another possibility is that such businesses are involved in activities that are more likely to require Indigenous workers, such as cultural tourism or the Indigenous art sector.

Historically, little research has been conducted on the nexus between businesses and Indigenous workers, but we would expect Indigenous employers to provide working conditions that are sympathetic to the needs and preferences of Indigenous workers (e.g. because of greater cultural awareness and cultural competency). Hunter and Hawke (2001) used linked employee–employer data from the mid 1990s to find that workplaces with Indigenous employees were more likely than other workplaces to have a written policy on racial harassment, and a formal grievance procedure to resolve disputes that arise on either racial or sexual harassment grounds.

In 2006, prime minister John Howard and Professor Mick Dodson launched the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program, which was administered by Reconciliation Australia (www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/about). The RAP program was partly based on the desire to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, a watershed moment in Australian history that arguably symbolised the ideas and practice of reconciliation. The program encourages organisations to develop a business plan that documents the ‘actions’ they will take to contribute to reconciliation. Many major Australian businesses, including Indigenous businesses and organisations, have RAPs; they generally include strategies and actions to create awareness of cultural issues in the workplace and community at large, and often include explicit targets for Indigenous employment. The increasing numbers of RAPs in Australian businesses means that Indigenous-friendly work environments are not confined to Indigenous businesses.

Hunter and Gray (2013) analysed all federal workplace agreements between 1997 and 2013 and found that there was a clear concentration of agreements with provisions for cultural or ceremonial leave in a relatively small number of workplaces where Indigenous participation is high. About 40 per cent of agreements and 70 per cent of employees are covered by such leave provisions in workplaces where the majority of employees identify as Indigenous. Of course, the more Indigenous workers employed in a business, the more likely the organisation is to know about the needs and preferences of Indigenous people (by critical mass and exposure to Indigenous culture). Clearly, Indigenous-specific award provisions are concentrated in workplaces that are already likely to be Indigenous-friendly. The positive effect of having a substantial cohort of Indigenous workers is likely to make it easier to employ additional Indigenous workers.

Another relevant issue for this paper is that it might be difficult for businesses to identify all their

Indigenous staff. This could even be an issue for Indigenous businesses; Foley (2005) interviewed numerous Indigenous businesses that were attractive to Aboriginal workers, including logging companies, oyster farmers and fishing trawlers, and found that the management sometimes had difficulty identifying Aboriginal people with some non-Indigenous heritage (also see Foley 2000). It is also not possible to be confident that all Indigenous staff would openly identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, especially if they believe that they might be discriminated against (Biddle et al. 2013). Despite these issues, the following data offer a unique opportunity to gain insight into an underresearched area.

Data

This paper uses data from ICN Gateway, a comprehensive online system with around \$247 billion worth of projects and more than 60,000 suppliers listed. The ICN can be characterised as a ‘dating’ agency for businesses trading in goods and services at various stages of the supply chain. It could therefore play a useful role in increasing participation of Indigenous businesses in supply chains. The Black Business Finder (BBF) is an organisational unit of the ICN that coordinates the validation of data on Indigenous equity, by making regular contact with businesses identified as Indigenous businesses. The BBF actively looks for potential Indigenous businesses, and is also a platform for government or businesses looking to source goods and services from Indigenous suppliers. The BBF addresses this need by making information available in the market about the existence and capability of Indigenous businesses. This is good for Indigenous businesses and for industry at large. By integrating Indigenous businesses into private sector and government supply chains, the BBF encourages growth and development of these businesses. The ICN website (www.icn.org.au) claims that the network has helped local suppliers win more than \$17 billion worth of contracts that might otherwise have gone overseas.

In Queensland, the ICN is a division of QMI Solutions Limited, a not-for-profit organisation supported by the Queensland Government. ICN Queensland has offices in Brisbane, Townsville, Gladstone and Toowoomba; its team of specialist staff has a wide range of experience in engineering, technology and procurement.

Most businesses listed on the ICN Queensland database have information on the size of the workforce and the number of employees who have been identified as

Indigenous. Many also have information on the annual turnover of the business operation. This paper uses five categories of business size that may not align perfectly with standard ABS categories.⁶ The reason for this empirical choice is to maximise the power of the statistical analysis when dealing with relatively small numbers of Indigenous businesses. Indigenous businesses were spread relatively evenly across the categories used in this paper, with the exception of the largest businesses (which included relatively few Indigenous businesses). All other categories of workforce size have sufficient numbers of businesses to provide reliable results measured with reasonable accuracy (small confidence intervals).

The ICN data include basic information on the broad industry that a business operates in. These industries are not mutually exclusive or classified according to the standard ABS classification or the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) (ABS 2008). Instead, the industry data are identified by the businesses themselves—this facilitates matching of businesses that buy and supply goods and services. The staff responsible for the ICN database indicated that the nominated industries will be correlated with the ANZSIC classification. It should be noted that many businesses will have indicated more than one industry, to maximise their chances of linking with a suitable trading partner.

The ICN data also include information on the location of the headquarters of the business. Although it is important to understand the market conditions that the business operates in, that information was not available for analysis because most of the headquarters were located in Brisbane, which is not necessarily where the workers work or the business is conducted. Accordingly, information on the location of the business headquarters was not used in the analysis described in this paper.

The following analysis also explores some implications of extending the definition of Indigenous business from the majority-equity definition to include equal partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, where 50 per cent equity in a business is held by Indigenous people. For the remainder of this paper, we refer to these latter businesses as joint-owned Indigenous businesses. For simplicity, all other businesses are called non-Indigenous, although Indigenous people may hold some equity in them as minority shareholders.

Descriptive analysis of ICN data

The final sample with complete information on all the variables used in the main analysis covered 14,495 non-Indigenous businesses and 183 Indigenous businesses. Only 18 of the majority-owned Indigenous businesses have indicated that they are certified as Indigenous businesses for the purposes of Supply Nation. This is only about 10 per cent of all Indigenous businesses in the sample, but 15 per cent of majority-owned Indigenous businesses that can theoretically use the services provided by Supply Nation. Therefore, even within the current definitions of Indigenous business used by Supply Nation, there may be considerable scope for increased coverage of services offered.

Table 1 summarises the workforce size and turnover of businesses, by Indigenous status, from the ICN Queensland data. This indicates that Indigenous businesses are more than 10 times smaller than non-Indigenous businesses in workforce size. For annual turnover, the differential is smaller. However, non-Indigenous businesses are at least three times larger, in terms of turnover, than both categories (majority-owned and joint-owned) of Indigenous businesses reported.

TABLE 1. Business employment and turnover, by Indigenous status of business, 2013

	Non-Indigenous businesses	Majority-owned Indigenous businesses	Joint-owned Indigenous businesses	All Indigenous businesses
Average size of workforce	187.2	17.5	18.4	17.6
Proportion of workforce identified as Indigenous (%)	0.7	72.4	46.9	64.0
Average turnover (\$'000)	9,896	3,204	2,222	2,828
Number of businesses	14,495	124	59	183

Notes: There are 17,710 businesses on the ICN database, but the following analysis uses only those businesses that employ some people, and indicate the numbers of Indigenous and other employees. Information on the Indigenous workforce is provided for a subset of businesses. However, the subset is substantial: 83% of non-Indigenous businesses provide information on both the size of the workforce and the number of Indigenous workers.

The main message from Table 1 is that the likelihood of Indigenous workers being employed is much higher for Indigenous businesses. This is particularly true for majority-owned businesses, which are around 100 times more likely to employ Indigenous workers than non-Indigenous businesses.

All the statistics in this paper have standard errors estimated using jackknife estimators, which have the desirable property that the confidence intervals are robust even if the underlying distribution of the random variable is not a normal distribution (Miller 1974).⁷ Any reference to significance in the text indicates that the difference between two figures is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.

Table 2 reports the percentage of Indigenous and other businesses whose workforces have various proportions of Indigenous employees. That is, it presents the frequency distribution of the proportion of the workforce identified as Indigenous in different types of business. For example, 95.4 per cent of non-Indigenous businesses have between zero and 5 per cent of the workforce identified as Indigenous employees. In contrast, only 2.4 per cent of majority-owned Indigenous businesses are in the same category. Table 2 also indicates that there is a substantial clump of Indigenous businesses that have around half the workforce identified as Indigenous. This is true for both definitions of Indigenous businesses, but is particularly pronounced for joint-owned businesses—one-fifth of such businesses have between 45 and 50 per cent of their workforce identified as Indigenous employees. This indicates that the variable is not normally distributed. There is also some evidence of another clump of Indigenous businesses that have between 95 and 100 per cent of the workforce identified as Indigenous. Indeed, almost half of majority-owned Indigenous businesses have very high concentrations of Indigenous workers.

Partnerships (joint-owned businesses) are more likely to be clustered at the halfway mark of the distribution, while majority-owned businesses have a cluster at the 95 to 100 per cent range (i.e. the workplace is dominated by Indigenous workers). The results for joint-owned businesses are not surprising, especially for micro-enterprises in which the Indigenous and non-Indigenous owners may both be classified as employees. Hence, in the absence of other employees, there would be a tendency to have 50 per cent of employees being Indigenous. In terms of statistical distributions, the proportion of Indigenous workers is definitely not normally distributed and is multimodal for Indigenous

TABLE 2. Relative frequencies of businesses by proportion of workforce identified as Indigenous, 2013

Proportion of workforce identified as Indigenous (%)	Proportion of businesses (%)		
	Majority-owned Indigenous businesses	Joint-owned Indigenous businesses	Non-Indigenous businesses
0 to <5	2.4	13.6	95.4
5 to <10	0.0	3.4	1.9
10 to <15	3.3	5.1	1.2
15 to <20	4.9	5.1	0.5
20 to <25	2.4	8.5	0.4
25 to <30	1.6	5.1	0.2
30 to <35	3.3	1.7	0.1
35 to <40	0.0	3.4	0.0
40 to <45	1.6	1.7	0.1
45 to <50	13.0	20.3	0.0
50 to <55	0.8	1.7	0.1
55 to <60	5.7	0.0	0.0
60 to <65	1.6	5.1	0.1
65 to <70	3.3	3.4	0.0
70 to <75	3.3	3.4	0.0
75 to <80	2.4	3.4	0.0
80 to <85	1.6	1.7	0.0
85 to <90	1.6	0.0	0.0
90 to <95	0.0	3.4	0.0
95 to 100	47.2	10.2	0.0

Note: The row entries may not sum precisely to 100 because of rounding errors.

Source: ICN database

businesses (at least three significant modes or ‘lumps’ in the distributions).

Despite the lack of an underlying normal distribution, it is clear that Indigenous businesses have a range of employment outcomes for Indigenous employees, but those outcomes are almost always substantially better than in non-Indigenous businesses. The important implication of the statistical distributions is that it is difficult to measure averages robustly when there is considerable heterogeneity among Indigenous businesses in the crucial parameter of Indigenous employment. The empirical techniques employed in the following analysis take into account this statistical distribution.

One of the most important drivers of workplace culture and management is the size of the workforce (Callus et al. 1991). Fig. 1 shows the proportion of employees identified as Indigenous by workforce size. Non-Indigenous businesses are not reported in this figure; the proportions of Indigenous workers identified in such workplaces are close to zero for all workforce sizes. Among small Indigenous businesses with 20 or fewer employees, the proportion of employees identified as Indigenous is significantly higher in majority-owned Indigenous businesses than in joint-owned Indigenous businesses. However, on balance, majority-owned businesses are more like joint-owned Indigenous businesses than non-Indigenous businesses.

Table 3 presents non-Indigenous results alongside the aggregated results for all Indigenous businesses. The standard errors for all Indigenous businesses are smaller when majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses are combined, and larger Indigenous businesses have significantly lower proportions of Indigenous workers than micro-businesses (i.e. with five or fewer employees).

Table 4 reports the relevant variables in the ICN Queensland data according to the main industrial activity of the business. Note that majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses are collapsed into one category to increase the number of businesses in certain industry categories and hence the reliability of the results. For oil and gas, construction and engineering, manufacturing, and mining, it is clear that non-Indigenous

TABLE 3. Proportion of workforce identified as Indigenous by size of workforce and broadest category of Indigenous status of business

Number of workers	Non-Indigenous businesses	All Indigenous businesses
1–5	0.4 (0.1)	75.0 (2.9)
6–10	0.9 (0.1)	57.2 (4.8)
11–20	0.9 (0.1)	51.2 (7.8)
21–100	0.9 (0.1)	51.7 (5.8)
More than 100	0.7 (0.1)	31.0 (7.3)

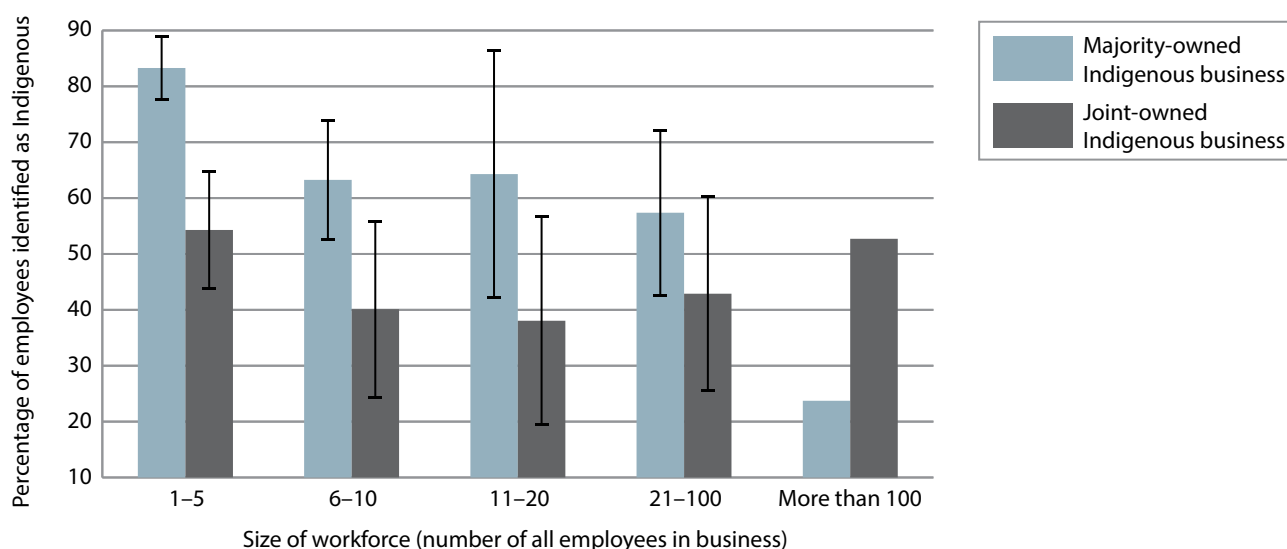
Note: Standard errors were estimated using a jackknife estimator and are reported in brackets.

Source: ICN database

businesses—which are around 10 times larger in both workforce size and turnover—are substantially (30–40 times) less likely than Indigenous businesses to employ Indigenous workers. In the professional services sector, non-Indigenous businesses are even larger relative to Indigenous businesses and have a similarly low employment rate of Indigenous workers.

The number of businesses in each category indicates the distribution of businesses across industries. There are substantial numbers of businesses in each industry category, but the majority of businesses are in the ‘other industries’ category. Ideally, it would be desirable to disaggregate all industrial activities recorded, but these other industries include relatively small numbers of Indigenous businesses.⁸ In Table 4, ‘other industries’ is

FIG. 1. Proportion of workforce identified as Indigenous by size of workforce and extent of Indigenous equity in business, 2013



Notes: The 95% confidence intervals are shown for firms with 100 or fewer employees. It is not possible to estimate confidence intervals for Indigenous businesses with more than 101 workers because of the small number of such businesses.

Source: ICN database

TABLE 4. Characteristics of businesses by Indigenous status and industrial activity, 2013

	Non-Indigenous businesses	Indigenous businesses
Oil and gas sector		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	1.7	51.1
Average size of workforce	506.0	30.9
Average turnover (\$'000)	38,600	4,138
Number of businesses	2,652	40
Construction and engineering sector		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	1.9	51.1
Average size of workforce	344.8	26.7
Average turnover (\$'000)	29,300	4,621
Number of businesses	3,381	73
Manufacturing sector		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	1.2	50.5
Average size of workforce	268.4	25.6
Average turnover (\$'000)	29,100	2,604
Number of businesses	1,511	26
Mining sector		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	1.6	55.0
Average size of workforce	424.1	31.2
Average turnover (\$'000)	40,600	4,279
Number of businesses	2,342	47
Professional services sector		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	1.3	63.8
Average size of workforce	381.1	18.4
Average turnover (\$'000)	24,800	875
Number of businesses	1,257	52
Other industrial activities		
Average proportion of workforce who are Indigenous (%)	0.2	74.8
Average size of workforce	78.5	10.6
Average turnover (\$'000)	2,053	1,185
Number of businesses	8,763	58

Note: 'Indigenous businesses' include both majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses.

Source: ICN database

a residual category that covers businesses that do not have industrial activities associated with oil and gas, construction and engineering, manufacturing, mining, or professional services.

Non-Indigenous businesses were again much larger than Indigenous businesses in terms of both workforce size and turnover, especially in the professional services sector, where the overall workforce was more than 20 times larger and the turnover was close to 30 times that in Indigenous businesses.

The author worked iteratively with ICN staff to ensure that these data were clean and credible, and excluded outliers. For example, almost all Australian businesses employ less than 50,000 workers, and hence ICN businesses were excluded if they employed more than this number. Note that this assumption is justified by the fact that none of the businesses retained in the analysis were among the 200 largest Australian companies. Hence, any ICN business claiming to have more than 50,000 workers is most likely to be doing so in error. In the course of cleaning the data, it became clear that turnover was likely to be measured with more error than workforce size.

Logistic analysis of which businesses are likely to have Indigenous equity

The ICN Queensland data provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into what sort of businesses are Indigenous businesses. Given how little is known about Indigenous businesses, it is useful to supplement the above cross-tabulations with a multivariate analysis of Indigenous businesses to provide a summary of characteristics that predict whether a business is Indigenous, including whether it is a joint-owned or majority-owned business. Since this involves modelling a limited dependent variable—that is, whether a business is Indigenous—it is appropriate to use a logistic regression model (Hosmer & Lemeshow 2000). The main advantage of this type of model is that the effects of various characteristics can be expressed in terms of the likelihood of the business being an Indigenous business (i.e. the odds ratio).

Table 5 reports the odds ratios for a logistic model, which predicts which businesses are likely to be Indigenous businesses, according to the various definitions used in this paper. The table reports the odds of a business being an Indigenous business relative to micro-businesses (1–5 employees) that do not engage in any of the industrial activities listed in Table 5. Indigenous businesses are significantly less likely than non-

TABLE 5. Estimation of odds ratios for a business being an Indigenous business, logistic regression

	All Indigenous businesses			Joint-owned businesses		Majority-owned businesses			
	Odds ratio		T-value	Odds ratio		T-value	Odds ratio		T-value
Workplace size 6–10	0.389	***	–4.15	0.340	**	–2.37	0.395	***	–3.46
Workplace size 11–20	0.416	***	–3.64	0.758		–0.76	0.292	***	–3.74
Workplace size 21–100	0.443	***	–4.08	0.644		1.32	0.373	***	–3.95
Workplace size 101+	0.072	***	–5.10	0.072	***	–2.57	0.073	***	–4.38
Oil and gas	0.985		–0.07	1.084		0.21	0.959		–0.15
Construction	1.984	***	3.85	2.984	***	3.68	1.618	**	2.17
Manufacturing	1.075		0.31	1.025		0.06	1.110		0.37
Professional services	3.510	***	7.19	2.223	**	2.37	4.040	***	6.78
Mining	1.329		1.23	0.779		–0.60	1.713	**	1.96
Constant	0.015	***	–34.80	0.004	***	–24.30	0.010	***	–31.61
Pseudo R ²	0.070			0.049			0.078		
No. of observations	14,679			14,679			14,679		

Notes: The reference group is non-Indigenous micro-businesses (1–5 workers) that do not engage in any of the industrial activities listed. *, **, and *** denote that the odds ratio is statistically significant at the 10%, 5% and 1% level of significance, respectively. 'All Indigenous businesses' include both majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses.

Indigenous businesses to have more than six employees. The odds of being an Indigenous business are 1/13 times those of being a non-Indigenous business for a business that has more than 101 workers. If a business involves construction activities, it is twice as likely to be an Indigenous business, while businesses involving professional activities are close to 3–4 times as likely to be an Indigenous business.

Note that the findings from this logistic analysis are robust to the use of turnover, instead of workforce, to identify the size of the business. However, as indicated above, the following regression analysis uses the number of workers to measure the size of the business operations because the industrial relations literature has long recognised that workplace size is a key driver of management strategies, behaviours and businesses outcomes (Callus et al. 1991).

An omission from the logistic regression is the proportion of workers identified as Indigenous. This paper assumes that Indigenous employment outcomes are driven by Indigenous businesses, rather than the reverse.

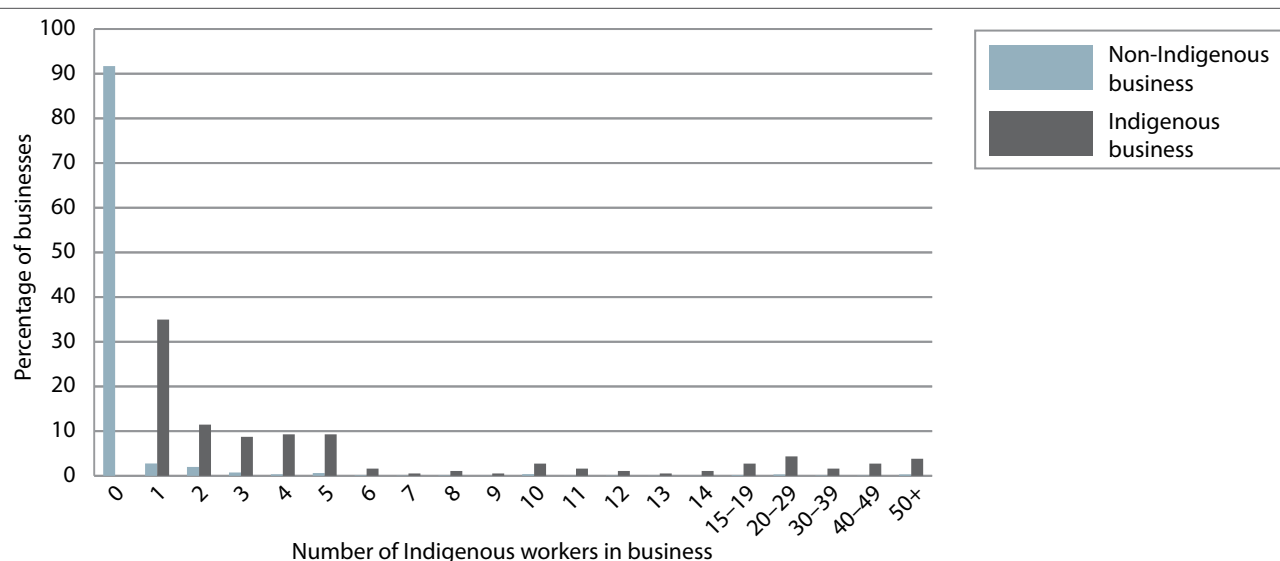
Multivariate analysis of number of Indigenous workers a business employs

The multimodal distribution of the proportion of Indigenous workers (see Table 2) means that this is not a normally distributed variable, and hence it is not appropriate to use ordinary least squares (OLS)

techniques to analyse this dependent variable. However, the count data of the number of Indigenous workers in a business broadly follows the Poisson distribution, with some evidence of overdispersion (Fig. 2). The number of Indigenous employees is heavily skewed towards zero, especially among non-Indigenous businesses. Accordingly, it is appropriate to use a negative binomial regression model or another count data regression model.

Fig. 2 confirms that non-Indigenous businesses have many fewer Indigenous workers than Indigenous businesses: most non-Indigenous businesses have no Indigenous workers, but all Indigenous businesses have at least one Indigenous worker. The relative frequencies for Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses barely overlap, and they are clearly drawn from different populations with respect to Indigenous employment.

Table 6 reports the results from a negative binomial regression model of the number of Indigenous employees. The likelihood-ratio test of overdispersion is significant at the conventional levels, and hence the negative binomial model is preferred to the other standard count data models. Notwithstanding, alternative regression models (including Poisson, Tobit and OLS models) were estimated using suitably transformed dependent variables, but all the analyses point to the same basic result: even after controlling for workplace size and industry activities, Indigenous businesses are significantly more likely to be associated with more Indigenous workers.

FIG. 2. Numbers of Indigenous workers in businesses, by Indigenous business status, 2013

Note: 'Indigenous business' includes both majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses.
Source: ICN database

TABLE 6. Prediction of the number of Indigenous workers employed in a workplace, negative binomial model

	No control for Indigenous businesses			All Indigenous-owned businesses		Joint-owned businesses		Majority-owned businesses	
	Incidence rate ratio	T-value		Incidence rate ratio	T-value	Incidence rate ratio	T-value	Incidence rate ratio	T-value
Indigenous businesses				129.57 ***	19.5	43.98 ***	8.1	94.59 ***	14.5
Workplace size 6–10	0.68 ***	–2.8		1.59 ***	2.8	0.80	–1.6	1.07	0.5
Workplace size 11–20	0.69 ***	–2.8		1.56 ***	2.8	0.73 **	–2.4	1.18	1.1
Workplace size 21–100	0.63 ***	–3.9		1.31 *	1.8	0.68 ***	–3.2	0.98	–0.1
Workplace size 101+	0.25 ***	–10.5		0.77 *	–1.7	0.27 ***	–9.9	0.53 ***	–4.5
Oil and gas	1.57 ***	4.2		1.96 ***	7.2	1.69 ***	5.2	1.75 ***	5.7
Construction	3.10 ***	13.1		3.79 ***	17.1	3.23 ***	13.9	3.54 ***	15.6
Manufacturing	0.94	–0.5		0.93	–0.7	0.85	–1.4	1.03	0.3
Professional services	2.89 ***	8.4		1.79 ***	5.0	2.85 ***	8.5	2.06 ***	6.1
Mining	1.49 ***	3.7		1.41 ***	3.6	1.61 ***	4.7	1.30 **	2.6
Constant	0.01 ***	–46.8		0.00 ***	–42.9	0.01 ***	–47.1	0.00 ***	–45.7
Pseudo R ²	0.027			0.092		0.041		0.066	
Number of observations	14,678			14,678		14,678		14,678	

Notes: Offset variable is the log of number of employees, which we expect to be directly associated with the number of Indigenous employees. Incidence rate ratio indicates the incidence rate for people with a particular characteristic relative to the reference group. The reference group is non-Indigenous micro-businesses (1–5 workers) that do not engage in any of the industrial activities listed above. *, **, and *** denote that the incidence rate ratio is statistically significant at the 10%, 5% and 1% level of significance, respectively.

Another consistent finding in Table 6 is that large businesses are less likely to employ additional Indigenous workers overall. This is probably because such workplaces are constrained by the supply of suitably skilled Indigenous workers, but this is a question for

future research. Regression models document the statistical significance, but not the importance, of the observation. Table 7 addresses the latter by asking which sorts of businesses actually employ most Indigenous workers.

TABLE 7. Percentage of Indigenous workers by Indigenous status of business and workforce size

Workforce size	Indigenous workers		All workers	
	Indigenous businesses	Non-Indigenous businesses	Indigenous businesses	Non-Indigenous businesses
1–5	1.20	0.44	0.01	0.51
6–10	0.84	1.53	0.01	0.86
11–20	1.18	2.43	0.01	1.32
20–100	6.69	10.29	0.07	5.79
More than 100	1.26	74.13	0.02	91.40

Note: 'Indigenous businesses' include both majority-owned and joint-owned Indigenous businesses. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Source: ICN database

Although the above analysis demonstrates that small Indigenous businesses are the most likely to employ Indigenous workers, policy needs to take account of where most Indigenous people are currently employed to ensure that balanced policy settings are in place. Table 7 shows that, although the average non-Indigenous business is not performing well in terms of Indigenous employment, almost 89 per cent of Indigenous workers in the ICN Queensland sample are employed in non-Indigenous businesses, with the vast majority of these being in large businesses (74% in the 101+ workers category). Clearly, the overall predominance of non-Indigenous businesses in the labour market means that policy needs to take into account the socioeconomic environment in such businesses when attempting to close the gap for Indigenous employment. Encouraging Indigenous businesses may substantially improve Indigenous employment outcomes, but it cannot be the only strategy to reduce Indigenous employment disadvantage.

There are large numbers of small non-Indigenous businesses—almost one-third have five or fewer employees; however, they employ only 0.4 per cent of Indigenous workers and 0.5 per cent of all workers. If the goal of policy is to improve Indigenous employment outcomes, policy must encourage Indigenous employment in medium to large non-Indigenous businesses as well as Indigenous businesses.

The analysis in this paper has so far focused on analysing outcomes at a business level—that is, using information on individual businesses. However, Tables 7 and 8 provide information across businesses on the relationships between categories of businesses and workers. The ICN database contains data on more than 13,700 Indigenous workers employed in businesses; most are in non-Indigenous businesses. When the Indigenous workforce is expressed as a percentage of all workers, only 0.45 per cent of workers in non-Indigenous

TABLE 8. Indigenous employment by Indigenous business status

	Indigenous business		
	Non-Indigenous businesses	Joint-owned businesses	Majority-owned businesses
Number of Indigenous employees	12,221	476	1,058
Indigenous employment rate (%)	0.45	43.9	49.4
Indigenous employment relative to non-Indigenous business	1	97	110
Indigenous employment in sample (%)	89	3	8

Note: Employment rate is calculated as the percentage of Indigenous workers among the total workforce of all businesses in that category of business.

Source: ICN database

businesses are Indigenous (Table 8). This estimate varies from the estimate in Table 1 because, as noted above, the distribution of the proportion of Indigenous workers in each business is highly non-normal. However, the underlying conclusion from this paper is robust; the effect is even stronger when we examine individual employment within various business categories. Indigenous businesses are still about 100 times more likely to employ an Indigenous Australian than non-Indigenous businesses. Majority-owned Indigenous businesses have only a slightly higher rate of Indigenous employment than joint-owned Indigenous businesses (with 50% Indigenous equity).

The unresolved question that arises from this paper is: why are many non-Indigenous businesses so poor at employing Indigenous people? The next section addresses this question.

Concluding remarks

One of the motivations for this paper was to explore whether majority-owned Indigenous businesses are categorically different from joint-owned Indigenous businesses. These two categories of businesses are not very different from one another; almost all tend to have a substantially higher probability of employing Indigenous people than non-Indigenous businesses. Hence, policy should seek to encourage both types of Indigenous businesses and not solely focus on majority-owned businesses. Since both categories of Indigenous businesses are associated with good Indigenous employment outcomes, they should both be encouraged via procurement policies and contracts to larger organisations (via RAPs or other policy strategies).

RAPs may have a role to play, especially for non-Indigenous businesses. However, most RAPs are in larger businesses because the fixed costs of establishing and monitoring the plans may not be justifiable in smaller businesses with tighter profit margins.

Another effective strategy could be to extend the coverage of policies that support Indigenous businesses to include joint-owned Indigenous businesses. For example, Supply Nation could relax the definition of Indigenous businesses to include partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders. This could facilitate more extensive engagement of Indigenous businesses in the supply chain.

Of course, to encourage Indigenous businesses, we need to understand what makes a successful Indigenous entrepreneur. Foley and Hunter (2014) demonstrate that several issues need to be addressed:

- Suitable business-related qualifications may be an impediment for many Indigenous entrepreneurs.
- Social capital, especially bridging social capital, is likely to be important. Indigenous businesses need to have extensive social connections with potential trading partners, including non-Indigenous businesses and customers.
- Access to financial capital may be a constraint for some Indigenous businesses.

Instead of focusing solely on individual Indigenous entrepreneurs, it might be necessary to ask another question: what makes a business a friendly place for Indigenous workers? Hunter and Gray (2013) argue that substantial cohorts of Indigenous workers are associated with more culturally appropriate workplace conditions. Of course, having large numbers of Indigenous workers may facilitate a sympathetic management. However, if the fixed costs associated with creating Indigenous-friendly working conditions are substantial, there would be limits to the extent to which smaller non-Indigenous businesses could be encouraged to foster a positive working environment.

One complicating factor in the relationship between the size of businesses and Indigenous employment is that larger businesses can require a range of skills because they are more likely to employ both specialised (or skilled) and unskilled staff. Since potential Indigenous staff are less likely to have high levels of educational attainment or skills, larger businesses may be more likely to employ Indigenous staff (all else being equal). Any attempt to compare similar businesses with respect to how Indigenous-friendly they are will need to conduct a skills audit of the organisations.

The analysis in this paper has largely focused on business-level data. In contrast, Hunter (2013) used aggregated census data to illustrate that the more Indigenous entrepreneurs in an area, the better the overall Indigenous employment outcomes. However, to make progress in understanding the underlying issues, we need to collect more detailed information on individual workers (including their strengths and weaknesses). Data on how the business is organised and operates is also needed, in order to understand the whole social and economic relationship of Indigenous workers and their employers. That is, we need linked employer–employee data. Given that representative data do not exist in the context of Indigenous workers and employers or businesses, any such information will probably have to be collected by researchers.

Labour market discrimination is all too common for many Indigenous people (Biddle et al. 2013). The nature of labour market discrimination means that potential workers or jobseekers may have been denied employment; thus researchers and policy-makers also need to look outside the workforce. Clearly, there are limits to the research questions that can be addressed using linked employer–employee data. Audit-based analysis of discrimination studies is likely to be another constructive avenue for research on the issues that need

to be addressed to maximise employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Although it is beyond the scope of the current research to resolve such issues, it is reasonable to speculate on at least three possible explanations for the observations in this paper.⁹ First, there may be fixed costs of hiring culturally diverse workers—this would discourage smaller non-Indigenous businesses from employing Indigenous workers. Second, micro-businesses have specific skill requirements that most Indigenous workers do not have—for example, small businesses need a flexible workforce with multiple skills to deal with challenges that may be met by specialised professional staff in a larger organisation. Third, discrimination may be a more important problem in a smaller non-Indigenous business because friction between staff, between customers and staff, and between management and staff, are more likely to undermine the operation of the business.

Rather than focusing on the role of non-Indigenous businesses, the hypothesis raised above is that Indigenous employees choose to work in organisations that understand their culture. Arguably, one of the mechanisms by which Indigenous workers self-select into their current jobs is by the way they look for jobs. Indigenous jobseekers are more likely than other Australian jobseekers to look for jobs using friends and relatives (Gray & Hunter 2005). Because Indigenous social networks are highly likely to know about job opportunities in Indigenous businesses, friends and families will be more likely to direct Indigenous jobseekers into such businesses. It is probably not surprising to find concentrations of Indigenous workers in Indigenous-owned businesses. The unresolved issue is whether it is possible to substantially improve workplace environments in non-Indigenous businesses so that more Indigenous workers want to work in these enterprises.

One way of extracting further value from data in the ICN Gateway, or potentially other data provided by similar organisations, would be to use the ICN database as a sampling frame to collect data on a representative sample of Indigenous and other businesses to address these complex issues. That is, such data could theoretically be used to identify businesses that could be surveyed when collecting linked employer–employee data, or even to study discrimination. This paper has demonstrated that such research should be given a high priority if Indigenous employment disadvantage is to be substantially reduced.

Notes

1. One limitation of using the ‘self-employed’ census data proxy for identifying businesses is that it may understate the number of businesses (including Indigenous businesses); that is, census data will not identify Indigenous corporations in which no individuals identify as self-employed. For example, the chief executive or chair of the board of a corporation may see themselves as employees who manage, or may have multiple roles across several businesses that may not easily be classified as self-employed.
2. Supply Nation was formerly known as the Australian Indigenous Minority Supplier Council.
3. There has been a substantial recent growth in the number of Indigenous businesses; by early July 2014, 274 Indigenous businesses were identified in the ICN data. That is an increase in the overall number of Indigenous businesses of just under 50% since the data in this paper were extracted in November 2013.
4. See <http://supplynation.org.au/indigenous_businesses/Use_of_the_SN_Certified_Logo>, viewed 17 July 2013.
5. In some states of the United States, it is a felony to fraudulently claim certification as a minority business enterprise.
6. For example, the following analysis groups together businesses with 6–10 workers instead of the more standard statistical category in ABS publications, which examines workplaces with 5–9 workers (Callus et al. 1991).
7. This is just as well, since Table 2 clearly indicates that the frequency of the proportion of the business workforce identified as Indigenous is trimodal. That is, in contrast to a normal distribution, it has three ‘humps’ instead of one cluster centred on the mean.
8. Disaggregated information on all industrial activities was not collected because the coding would take additional resources that were not available for this research. Hence, the empirical strategy focused on industries where there were substantial numbers of Indigenous businesses.
9. Some non-Indigenous employers may not consider the indigeneity of employees (i.e. they do not ask about indigeneity or collect usable data). As a result, there could be under-enumeration of Indigenous employees by non-Indigenous businesses in this study. A countervailing factor is that businesses looking for supply opportunities through ICN have an incentive to identify any potential Indigenous workers, in order to secure contracts with public or private sector organisations where Indigenous employment is deemed as a priority (e.g. in RAPs). On balance, the size of the differential in Indigenous employment documented in this study cannot be explained solely by under-enumeration. Also, if employers do not see the value of collecting information on the Indigenous status of employees, they are unlikely to consider the needs of Indigenous employees.

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